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Saudi dynasty has new king, same agenda

Abdullah is a reformer, but new king's hands are tied by hard-liners.

August 2, 2005

By **Dan Murphy**, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

BAGHDAD

The passing of King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Monday marks the end of a reign that saw both the rise of militant Islam inside Saudi Arabia and a strengthening of ties with the United States.

Any shift in power in the kingdom, the world's largest oil producer, could cause economic ripples across the globe. But King Fahd's half-brother, Crown Prince Abdullah, has been running the day-to-day affairs of the country since 1995.

While King Abdullah is seen as a reformer, many analysts doubt his coronation will lead to major changes in domestic or foreign policies.

Supporters in the US view Abdullah as a king who could nudge the dynasty away from authoritarian rule to more free speech, women's rights, and modest political reform. But they also note that he wasn't able to make big changes in his caretaker role. Whether he has the authority and the desire to bring political change to Saudi Arabia is one of the key questions that the US hopes will be answered in the early months of his new reign. Washington will be looking for Abdullah to deepen the country's commitment to rooting out Islamist militants, to increase oil production to reduce high global prices, and to make some moves toward political reform.

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, a researcher at Tel Aviv University, also suggests that Abdullah might dust off his Middle East peace plan following Israel's withdrawal from Gaza in mid-August.

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"He may want to put a stamp on his first days of rule," he said. "It's possible that Abdullah says, 'Now that I'm king, I'll give more money to the Palestinian Authority, and take a higher profile on trying to coax this process forward.' They know that they need to win points in Washington and that's one way of doing it."

A lame-duck king?

But on domestic issues, most Saudi watchers doubt he will be much more powerful than he has been to date, given his age, his brothers around him who don't share his political views, and the questions left unresolved as to which line of grandchildren will eventually inherit the throne.

"You can almost argue that Abdullah is a lame-duck king," says Toby Craig Jones, a Saudi analyst for the International Crisis Group, a Brussels think tank. "Even if he is what everyone says he is - the one who's most committed to opening and liberal change in Saudi Arabia - he can't act on his own."

For instance his powerful brother Prince Nayef, who as minister of interior for the past 25 years has been in charge of all internal security and spy agencies, is close to a number of hard-line clerics and is suspicious of both political change, and close US ties.

Immediately upon King Abdullah's appointment, his younger brother Prince Sultan, a member of what's seen as a more conservative clique, was named crown prince, next in the line of succession.

Princeton University professor Michael Scott Doran argued in Foreign Affairs magazine last year that Saudi Arabia is shaped by two competing political trends: A group of Westward-looking reformers, and a conservative Wahhabi religious establishment that sees America as decadent and favors quasi-religious rule.

"Abdullah tilts toward the liberal reformers and seeks a rapprochement with the United States, whereas [Prince] Nayef sides with the clerics and takes direction from an anti-American religious establishment," Doran argued, saying Abdullah has backed more free speech, expressed support for democratic reforms, and reached out to Saudi Arabia's Shiite minority, who are hated as apostates by the Saudi's dominant Wahhabi clerics, who favor an exclusive and intolerant version of Sunni Islam.

"I don't necessarily think that Abdullah is as much a liberal democratic as some people think, and I don't think Nayef is as much of a militant hard-liner as some people think," says Mr. Jones. "Once people are

in power they have two missions: To manage the existing political system and to stay in power. So that's what they're going to focus on."

To be sure, some are predicting problems in the wake of King Fahd's death. Saad al-Faqih, a pro-democracy Saudi Islamist and an exiled dissident who lives in England, says the Saudi people are "fed up" with the royal family's mismanagement of the economy and their vast personal spending. He says this, coupled with likely disputes among the royals, could ultimately bring down the House of Saud.

"The brothers will want Abdullah to go on as he's been running the country until now, which has been almost like a power distribution arrangement," says Mr. Faqih. "But Abdullah wants full authority, which would mean his brothers would have limited power over their budgets, and they're going to oppose any efforts in this direction. King Fahd was a figurehead that they all could defer to; now that he's dead, there's no deference to anybody and I expect there will be disputes that will weaken the regime in front of the people."

30 percent unemployment

Despite its over \$100 billion a year in oil revenue, Saudi Arabia has 30 percent unemployment, most of its booming population is below the age of 21, and slums are sprouting on the edges of its steel and glass cities, causing political discontent. This, with what's often cited as the immorality and corruption of the Saud family, has helped fuel the country's surging Islamic militancy, say analysts.

Since the Kingdom's founding by Abdul Aziz ibn Saud in 1932 it has been run as a closed family corporation. The Saud family is the state, and the oil revenue accrues to the family, to be doled out as it sees fit. All senior appointments are held by family members.

Jones says that while there are disputes within the royal family, he expects they will govern Saudi Arabia's affairs much as they always have done: Signs of disunity could be destabilizing, so that the status quo basically serves the interests of all members of the family.

These factors create an inherent political conservatism and argue against the profound changes that could begin to ameliorate the fundamental economic and social problems that threaten the country's long-term health. "They've assured short-term stability but perhaps at the price of long-term stability," says Jones. "They haven't answered the question of how they're going to organize succession for the next generation, the grandchildren."

The Saudi dynasty has had six monarchs - the founder Ibn Saud and six of his 42 sons. The rules for succession may leave the monarchy in this generation's hands for at least two more kings, but decisions will have to be made on which line of grandchildren - there are hundreds of them - will eventually take over.

When King Abdullah became the Kingdom's caretaker, there were worries in the US that he was too close to the Kingdom's Wahhabi religious establishment, which is profoundly anti-American.

But after Al Qaeda, founded by the Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, turned its terror tactics on Saudi Arabia two years ago, the government went aggressively after domestic militants and Abdullah spoke out

against the clerics who support violent jihad. His own close ties to the US couldn't have been better illustrated than by his hand-in-hand walk at President George Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas earlier this year.

Under Crown Prince Abdullah, Saudi Arabia also had its first national elections - to municipal councils with limited authority, to be sure - but it was the first time that the family had allowed popular representation within the kingdom.

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**The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE
MONITOR®**

ISSN 2573-3850 (online)

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